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ABSTRACT

Assessment can play a vital role in ensuring the success of citizenship education. Assessment should be an on-going process that informs about the progress and development of students. Guidelines are presented for designing and planning assessment activities, and several formats for assessment are described. Basic guidelines for assessment are suggested: identify instructional goals, communicate instructional goals to students, integrate assessment with instruction, assess often, and use a variety of techniques. Some of the following techniques can give more meaningful and accurate data than multiple-choice and true or false tests: (1) group projects; (2) interviews with students; (3) essay questions; (4) informal observation; (5) formal observation; and (6) projects to help students realize the connection between instruction and the real world. Carefully planned assessments that reflect clearly defined objectives can enhance instruction. Four references are listed. (SLD)

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ASSESSING CIVICS EDUCATION

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Assessing Civics Education

by Lawrence M. Rudner, ERIC/TM

Civics education provides a common cultural heritage that prepares students for their lives as American citizens (Callahan and Banaszak, 1990). Assessment can play a vital role in ensuring the success of citizenship education.

Assessing students should be an on-going process which informs you about the progress and development of your students. Before you begin teaching, having accurate information about your students' existing citizenship knowledge, attitudes, and skills will help you design instructional activities. By giving you feedback during instruction, assessment can you help your students focus their efforts. And, unit tests, which summarize how much students have learned, can help you plan subsequent lessons.

This digest gives you guidelines for designing and planning assessment activities and describes several formats for assessment. It is designed to help you, as a classroom teacher, guide your instruction and provide accurate feedback to your students on their progress.

Basic Guidelines for Assessment

In designing assessments, you should:

1. **Identify your instructional goals and communicate them to your students.** Once you have identified goals and your students understand them, you can design assessments to monitor progress toward or mastery of those goals. For example, a question about how editorials are examples of a constitutional right can assess basic understanding of the Bill of Rights.
2. **Integrate assessment with instruction.** Assessment is simply gathering information about your students. Systematic data-gathering and recordkeeping can result in better classroom grouping, better decisions about individual students, and better pacing of instruction (Rudman, 1989).
3. **Assess often using a variety of techniques.** Multiple assessment approaches will help you tap the diverse knowledge, attitudes, and skills that characterize your students.

Assessment Techniques

While multiple-choice and true and false tests are commonly used in commercial testing programs, you can use a variety of other techniques to gather more meaningful and more accurate data. You may wish to consider some of the following techniques:

- **Group projects**

  The California State Department of Education has reported success in using group projects. To use this technique in your classroom, make students work in groups. Give each group a complex problem that requires planning, research, internal discussion, and group presentation. Be sure to develop scoring keys that define acceptable, good, and exceptional responses. This technique is particularly attractive because it facilitates cooperation and reinforces a valued outcome.

- **Interviews**

  The 1969 and 1976 National Assessments of Educational Progress Citizenship Assessments used many interview questions. Interviews can

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ensure that students understand the intent of a question. Interviews with younger students are more likely to elicit informative responses than open-ended, written questions. To prepare for interviews, identify both your questions and lists of acceptable and unacceptable responses.

- **Essay questions**

  Essays are often used to assess students' abilities to state and justify a position, outline viewpoints, incorporate information, and demonstrate an understanding of premises underlying our political system. A student's approach toward answering an essay question can be as revealing as the answer itself.

  Writing good essay questions requires careful planning. They should be broad enough to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge. Yet, they should address an explicit set of skills and not depend strictly on students' writing ability. As with other forms of assessment, establish scoring criteria before you administer an essay test.

- **Informal observation**

  Many teachers keep records of their students' activities that demonstrate citizenship concepts. At the end of each day, record positive behaviors, such as reinforcing others, probing for understanding, completing work neatly, and recognizing individual rights. These cumulative records can help you plan for parent conferences, counsel students, and make comments on report cards.

- **Formal observation**

  If you define behavior objectives that are action-oriented, you can use a more formal observation system to record observed behaviors and compare them with desired objectives. For example, you may specify consideration, evaluation, and respect for differing viewpoints as objectives. You can intentionally reinforce those behaviors by recording whether and how often you observe them and by providing accurate feedback to students about whether they are meeting your objectives.

- **Projects**

  Projects are a good way to help students realize the link between classroom instruction and the real world. Our democracy provides innumerable opportunities for meaningful projects. An upcoming ballot, for example, can give you a framework for assessing whether students understand the referendum process, conduct research efficiently, formulate educated opinions, and acknowledge and understand competing viewpoints. Remember to give your students guidelines about the purpose of the project, the areas that you will assess, and the criteria for evaluation.

Summary

You can draw from a wide variety of assessment techniques to evaluate citizenship education. These techniques can help you plan instruction and can help your students and their parents evaluate their growth. To ensure that they enhance your instruction, be sure that your assessment activities are carefully planned and reflect clearly defined objectives. As with all assessment activities, be sure that you identify scoring criteria before you implement any assessment.

Additional Reading

Callahan, W.T., Jr. and R.A. Banaszak (eds.), (1990) *Citizenship for the 21st Century*, Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies Education.

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